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ABSTRACT

Studies have confirmed that middle school students must learn to do the following: think about the future; recognize their responsibility for educational planning; broaden their aspirations beyond the stereotypes of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level; develop and maintain self-esteem; develop complexity; understand how school relates to future life roles; and recognize the broad scope of work in the 21st century. Vocational education (VE) can help middle school students learn to do all these things; however, the high school model of VE cannot be imposed directly on middle schools. Instead, VE programs for middle schools must incorporate middle school concepts in the following ways: make exploration of life's work an integral part of the middle school core for learning to live and work in a culturally diverse world; reflect developmental needs by helping students recognize their interests, aptitudes, and abilities in age- and stage-appropriate ways; integrate vocational and academic education to promote intellectual development; and assist with development of social skills, personal values, and self-esteem through home economics/family life courses and the activities of vocational student organizations. Programs illustrating the application of these ideas are being implemented in New York, Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Illinois. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Vocational Education in the Middle School

by Sandra Kerka

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Middle schools are designed to meet the developmental needs of early adolescents (ages 10-14). They are intended to provide general education focused on the concerns of this age group about themselves and the larger world, rather than specialization and concentration on separate subjects (Beane 1992). Young adolescents are undergoing rapid physical growth, moving from concrete to abstract thinking, forming a self-concept, and developing social skills ("Vocational Education in Middle Schools" 1990). At the same time, "most individuals significantly fashion their attitudes about learning, work and other enduring adult values during early adolescence" (Toepfer 1994, p. 61). Do young adolescents have a realistic view of the world of work and their potential place in it? What role should vocational education play in shaping this view and preparing middle schoolers for high school and for work in the 21st century? These questions are explored in this *ERIC Digest*.

Early Adolescents and the World of Work

Many young adolescents have sex-stereotyped views of occupations and often have already limited their aspirations (McDonald and Jessell 1992). They have difficulty seeing a connection between what they learn in school and future careers, and they often lack guidance in selecting courses that lay the groundwork for their high school and post-high school plans. For example, a National Center for Education Statistics survey of 23,000 eighth graders found that 50-60% planned to go to college, but only 25% planned to take college prep; 64% never talked to a counselor (Brandeis University 1992). In Wells and Gaus' (1991) study, 46% of middle schoolers had not had any career education, most did not see the relevance of academic subjects to career choice, and those in lower socioeconomic strata were less likely to have chosen a career path. At least half of the seventh and eighth graders in an Indiana study rejected vocational education as an option (Beymer 1989).

A crucial factor in the formation of vocational identity is self-esteem. McDonald and Jessell (1992) found that those seventh and eighth graders who believed a variety of careers were possible for themselves had high self-esteem, could assess complex career information, and were primarily female, of middle to high socioeconomic status, and from two-parent families. Although boys thought most jobs were appropriate for either sex, 75% were unwilling to make nontraditional choices for themselves (ibid.). Although females appear more open to nontraditional careers at this age, middle school girls begin to feel the effects of gender bias on their aspirations (Silverman and Pritchard 1994).

These findings suggest that middle school students need to learn to think about the future; recognize their responsibility for educational planning; broaden their aspirations beyond the stereotypes of gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level; develop and maintain self-esteem; develop cognitive complexity (essential for the knowledge work of the future); have parental support for career choices; understand how school relates to future life roles; and recognize the broad scope of work in the 21st century.

Vocational Education and the Middle School Concept

"Neither the high school model of college preparation (as academic education) nor the high school model of job preparation (as vocational education) can be effectively imposed on the middle school" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction 1991, p. 51). Instead, the middle school model focuses on intellectual development, social skills, personal values, and understanding of adult roles (American Vocational Association 1993; Beane 1992). Appropriate instructional strategies include interdisciplinary team teaching, exploratory education, learning organized around key concepts or themes, and cooperative learning.

However, "vocational preparation is not a central middle level educational purpose" (Toepfer 1994, p. 62). In preparing for high school and beyond, however, students must understand how course choices made now affect their future options. The 1994 "School-to-Work Opportunities Act builds the case for career-oriented programs at the middle grade level" ("Junior High and Middle School Programs" 1994, p. 20) by requiring students to choose a "career major" before 11th grade. Although specific occupational training is not appropriate at this level, vocational development clearly cannot be left until high school. Vocational education can help young adolescents with self-understanding (who am I?), social understanding (what is life's work?), and goal development (what do I want to become?) (Wisconsin 1991). "The vocational education program at the middle school level should give early adolescents a look at many careers and offer the opportunity to increase self-understanding as they prepare for an eventual occupation" ("Vocational Education in Middle Schools" 1990, p. 26). Vocational education can incorporate key middle school concepts in the following ways:

- Make exploration of life's work an integral part of the middle school core for learning to live and work in a culturally diverse world.
- Reflect developmental needs by helping students recognize their interests, aptitudes, and abilities in age- and stage-appropriate ways.
- Integrate vocational and academic education to promote intellectual development. "No real-world concepts, problems, or issues fit neatly into the jurisdiction of a single academic or vocational department" (Wisconsin 1991, p. 51).

- Assist with development of social skills, personal values, and self-esteem through home economics/family life courses and the activities of vocational student organizations.

The following descriptions illustrate the application of these ideas. AVA's (1993) Ad Hoc Middle Schools Task Force recommended three thematic areas for exploring life's work: (1) understanding self and others (because a positive self-image enables appreciation of a diverse society); (2) forming a concept of work (viewing life options in the family/work context); and (3) developing positive relationships (becoming a contributing member of family, work, and community). These themes are incorporated in New York State's Home and Career Skills course required of middle/junior high students and team taught by home economics teachers and counselors (AVA 1993). Its purpose is to help adolescents live in a world of constant change and improve the quality of life by preparing to meet their responsibilities as family members, consumers, home managers, and wage earners. Through modules on process skills, personal development, resource development, and career planning, students develop decision-making, problem-solving, resource management, and employability skills.

Exploring Life's Work (Wisconsin 1991) is a model middle school core curriculum. Using age-appropriate teaching strategies such as exploration, concept learning, cooperative learning, teachers engage students in activities with content drawn from the full spectrum of subjects (math, science, English, social studies, technology education, home economics, business education, etc.). The activities are clustered into themes reflecting student concerns and questions (e.g., conflict, choices, technology, family, community, work, enterprise).

Future Options Education (FOE) is a program emphasizing dropout prevention and development of work-related basic skills (Brandeis University 1992). It offers activities that introduce students to the world of work, providing career information that is age and stage appropriate and involving middle schoolers in job shadowing, monitored work experience, preapprenticeship, entrepreneurship, and community and neighborhood service. A key element of FOE is personalized attention from a support system of adults, including parents; school personnel who act as advisors, brokers, troubleshooters, or behavior modifiers; and community/business mentors.

New Bern-Craven County Schools in North Carolina adapted the BASICS integrated curriculum package for its middle schools ("Vocational Education in Middle Schools" 1990). The premise of BASICS is that academic skills are embedded in vocational tasks and vocational tasks provide a real-world context for academic skills. New Bern middle schoolers rotate through three career exploration labs that are team taught. In each lab, career exploration and employability skills competencies are correlated with math, science, social studies, communication, art/music, physical education, and guidance.

Another integration example is ACT (Applied academics, Career exploration, Technological literacy), jointly developed by 40 Illinois middle/junior high teachers (ibid.). Students learn academic subjects and explore career opportunities in the community by studying local hospitals, restaurants, and other enterprises. Through interdisciplinary themes relevant to student interests, ACT introduces students to the range of careers, enables application of academic skills, and integrates the study of technology.

Conclusion

A wide range of roles await vocational educators at the middle school level, from being part of interdisciplinary teams to developing short exploratory units or minicourses to becoming involved in complete restructuring of the middle school around a truly integrative curriculum (Beane 1992). They can expose early adolescents to vocational options by developing middle school administrator support, enlisting counselors and teachers in recruiting students, keeping parents informed of the value of vocational education, and developing student interest in relevant, contemporary ways ("Vocational Education in Middle Schools" 1990). The demands of the coming century make it imperative that vocational educators be members of the partnership of caring adults—teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and community—who seek to "guide young adolescents in developing a vision of their life's work" (Wisconsin 1991, p. 11).

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